

Castles on Clouds

Killing. I thought a lot about it growing up. When it was right, when it was wrong, if it was either of those things at all. Being brought up for nine years a Protestant Christian, I should've been all “thou shalt not blah blah blah” and “turn the other cheek, love thy father, thy neighbor, thine barking dog out back.” If things had been different, maybe I never would've killed, never would've felt the searing need to see somebody dead. But things aren't different. That's just the way life goes.

Growing up, my name was Christine Rosemarie Lansbury. What the hell my mother had been thinking when she'd named me, I could never figure out and I asked her plenty of times. The only honest answer she gave me, at least I think it was, she gave me when I was five.

“My mother's name was Christine.”

“My grandma?”

“*Oui, petite*, your *grandmere*.”

“Do you miss Grandma?”

“Yes, *chérie*, I miss her very much.”

Growing up, you miss things. Lots of things that you look back on and seem clear as day in hindsight. It might be something small, like how Mrs. What's-her-face down the road walked with a limp or your mom sneaking you extra vegetables when you weren't looking. Sometimes the things you miss are a whole lot bigger than extra carrots.

“Must you do that here? What if Christy heard something? She's just a baby.”

“She's three, hardly a baby. I will handle my business where I see fit.”

“But Charles--” I heard an echoing clap.

“Do not question me again.”

Los Angeles isn't exactly the safest city in the good ol' U.S.A. I need hardly elaborate the wealth of drugs, sex, and murder that crop up on a daily basis. What probably no one knew, though, was that all of it was orchestrated by one man, the same man I called Dad—Charles Lansbury. Most people saw my dad as an upstanding citizen, a philanthropist of the highest order, a man of firm moral fiber. Those same people never saw him hold a gun to someone's head.

Not that I knew about him from the get-go. No, I spent a good six years blissfully ignorant, all thanks to my mother, Dahlia Lansbury. She was beautiful, sandy blond hair, hazel-blue eyes, a smoky French voice that never sounded quite native even though she tried. Just like my name, I would never know what drew my mother to someone like Charles. She didn't talk much about her childhood, a few snippets here and there at Christmas or Easter or the occasional random nostalgia, but it seemed happy enough and one thing my mother definitely didn't lack was moral fiber. The one time I did ask her what drew her to my father, she got this teary smile on her face and I didn't ask her again because I never wanted to see her look like that, not because of me. Charles made her cry plenty.

“Mommy?” Mom looked up at me, mascara smudged beneath her eyes.

“Christy? What's wrong, honey?” I stood there between her knees, little hands reaching up to touch the splotch of purple on her cheek.

“You have a boo boo.”

“Just a little one. I doesn't hurt that bad.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very sure.” I leaned up anyway, pressing a sticky kiss on her cheek, covering the bruise with the remnants of my cherry popsicle.

“Does it feel better?”

“Yes, honey, it feels much better.”

“Good. Does that mean you'll sing tonight?”

“*Oui, ma petite*. What song do you want?”

“The castle song.”

“Again?”

“Please?”

“Haven't you memorized it by now?”

“Mama.”

“All right, all right.” Two arms picked me up, cradling me against a chest that smelled faintly of lavender and sugar.

“There is a castle on a cloud, I like to go there in my sleep. Aren't any floors for me to sweep. Not in my castle on a cloud.”

As a kid, I really did believe in castles on clouds and rooms of toys because after all, I had my lady in white, just like that little girl sang about.

“Come on Christy, we don't want to be late.”

“You're going out again?” Stephen stood in Mom's doorway, arms crossed with a petulance more indiciative of a teenager than a nine year old.

“Yes, they just brought *Les Miserables* to the theater. It's been a year since it came here so I thought I would take your petite soeur.”

“You shouldn't be going out all the time.”

“Stephen...”

“You're just jealous Mama spends all her time with me,” I said, hanging from Mom's hand. Stephen gave me a sneer, gray eyes like our father's snapping.

“Hardly.” Mama stiffened a bit; she did that a lot, but usually only because of Dad.

“Well...your sister and I will be home later. Good night, Stephen.” Mom led me by the hand out of her room, never looking back once.

I stopped being ignorant when I was six. It was spring and that meant rain. Usually a light mist, maybe a heavy drizzle. It so happened—because isn't that always the way—that it was an ironically dark and stormy rain. It was just after ten o'clock at night and I had been in bed for two hours without catching so much as a wink of sleep. Initially it was just because I wasn't tired and then it was because of the near-concussive thunder clamoring outside my window. I was six, so naturally my solution for being bored—because I was *not* scared, of course—was to crawl out of bed, teddy bear in hand, and search for Mom. One problem.

This included *leaving my bed*, a daunting prospect, not only because of the horrid weather, but because I had a bed far bigger than a six year old needed. Climbing in and out was like scaling Mount Everest, no lie. I crept towards my door, firmly closed as always, one small hand reaching for the brushed nickle doorknob. Technically speaking, I wasn't supposed to leave my bed and definitely not my room, but six year old logic dictated that I ignore this rule, at least this once, so ignore it I did.

Somehow the thunder was muffled in the hallway, enough that I could easily ignore it in favor of listening for Mom. I listened, listened hard, for the sound of a soft voice still carrying the hints of a French accent which I always tried desperately to imitate. Instead I heard a low murmur that somehow managed to carry a trace of East coast propriety. I followed it, recognizing it as Father's, thinking that he could tell me where Mom was. Maybe Mom was with him. She wasn't, but someone else was. It was a man, Hispanic, double over on the floor with a gun pressed to the back of his skull. I wasn't stupid, not totally. I knew what a gun was, knew what a gun could do. Like I said, I lived in LA. All I could do from the open door of my father's office was watch as my father, in his smooth upper-crust accent, chided the man for not paying him what they agreed on, for trying to get out of a deal.

"No one breaks a deal with me." That was all he said before his guard blew the man's brains all over the expensive Chinese rug.

Hollywood gets lots of things wrong, but the one thing I have seen them get right is what happens when someone is shot in the back of the head. It isn't something you mistake and you sure as hell never forget. Especially not when you're six years old. Blood and brain matter soaked the carpet as the man's body flew forwards, landing face down in the mess. I didn't scream, although I wanted to. I stood there, throat frozen, as my father ordered the body removed from his throne-like leather chair.

"Christy." I turned around, muscles so stiff it hurt, to find my mother standing in her bathrobe, hazel-blue eyes wide with terror. The door behind me opened farther and there stood Charles in dapper black suit and tie, one hand in his pocket.

"It's about time she learned about the real world. No more babying." He shut the door without another word. Mom slept with me that night, curled up beside me underneath

Pink Power Ranger bedsheets, whispering in French. “*Je regrete, je regrete, je regrete.*” Sometimes late at night, I can still hear those two words on a crying breath.

Things changed after that. I didn't ask where Father was when he missed dinner, I never left my room late at night. I lost that childish innocence, the smokescreen of youth that had blinded me to dead bodies down the hall.

In other ways, things didn't change, if only because I refused to let them. The mantra of “I'm sorry” murmured by my mother that night had made all the difference. I had realized then, as she held me beneath the covers, that she had known all along, that she had tried hard, so hard, to shield me from it. And that the death I saw that night had devastated her because to her, it meant she failed. And I would not let her think that. Ever.

“No, no, not *Phantom*. Put in *Les Mis*.”

“Again?”

“It's my favorite,” I said, elbows on the counter as I watched her cook.

“All right if you insist.” The first strains of music played, and even though I knew what was happening upstairs, I only thought about Mom smiling for the first time in two weeks.

I think I learned more about Mom in the next few years than I had the first six of my life. Maybe because somehow I realized she was too good for the life she was leading, maybe because she no longer felt obligated to hide things from me. Maybe because she knew nobody else wanted to know.

“You grew up in Paris?”

“*Oui, chérie*, from the time I was two.”

“And...you came here.”

“Yes, after I met your father.”

“What did Grandmere and Grandpere have to say?”

“Well, they weren't happy. They wanted me to stay in Paris.”

“I would want to stay in Paris too. Less pollution. Seriously, I can't see out the bus window anymore.” Mom laughed, preparing the meringue for her lemon pie. I sat there, watching her move around our kitchen, humming what I thought might've been *La Marseillaise*.

“Hey, Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Do you ever miss it?” Mom looked up from her baking, sandy blond hair pulled high in a tail.

“Miss what?”

“Paris.” She stopped for a moment, hand frozen on the wire whisk.

“Mom?” Her blue-brown eyes dropped for a moment, looking at the meringue in the bowl.

“Yes, *chérie*, I do miss it. Very much.”

“Maybe you can go back sometime. For a visit.” Mom smiled, that sad smile I had seen often in my short-lived childhood.

“Maybe someday.”

“And I can go with you?”

“Yes, *chérie*. You can go with me.”

But Mom never got the chance to see her home again. I think she knew she would never see France again, but couldn't bring herself to tell me so. I was nine when she died. It was a Monday, just after I got home from soccer practice, my braided hair—sandy blond like Mom's—damp with sweat that had more to do with the heat than the practice. The house was quiet, not that that was a surprise, and except for the occasional maid, it seemed empty. But it wasn't, couldn't be, because Father's driver had picked me up and Mom's own driver was in the kitchen with a cup of coffee worth more than my iPod. Mom was home, no doubt, but where? I headed up towards my room. Well, there was the garden, and the library, and her own room but first I had to drop off my backpack, that math book was--

“Charles, don't do this, please.” I was at my bedroom door, one strap off my shoulder. That was Mom's voice. Mom was scared. And Father was the reason.

“You won't leave me. I am not letting you leave me. And you are not taking the girl.”

“Please, I won't talk, I'll never talk, just let me and Christy go.” I ran. I had never run so fast. I threw open the door, finding before my eyes a frightening mimicry of that night three years ago. Mom was on her knees, crying, shaking hands pressed against the unstained

threads of his Persian rug and the barrel of Father's Glock pressed to the top of her head.

“Mom...”

“Christy, get ba--” The gun went off. Just like that night, brain and blood splattered everywhere, intermingled with threads of sandy blond. Father stood there, suit and tie gray this time, waiting for the barrel to cool.

“Go do your room. I have business to handle.”

I didn't go to my room. What I did do was probably pretty stupid and if Mom wasn't dead—God, she was *dead*—she would've tanned me ten shades of red for it and she had never even raised her voice to me. I lunged at one of his guards. I was nine years old, a skinny, scrawny nine years old, moving purely on instinct and rage. Surprisingly enough, rage does make your vision go red. Some clichés are true. I didn't even touch the gun before I grabbed from behind by goon number *deux*, a slightly skinnier version of the first. I slammed an elbow backwards, the way I had seen a girl do one day while waiting for my ride home. The guard dropped to the floor, curling in on himself. Apparently he forgot to wear his cup that day. Just like I forgot, even as I yanked his gun from his hip holster, that I had no idea how to use a damn gun. I didn't care. At all. Not a bit. All I cared about was that my mother's body was on the floor and drops of blood now stained my tennis shoes and the man responsible was standing there as if he hadn't just shot her in the damn head. But stood there he did, even as trembling, nine year old hands pointed a gun at his chest.

“If I'd known you would be this dramatic, I would've just killed her before you came home.”

“You son of a bitch,” I snarled, using words that Mom would've blushed at. Unladylike, she would've said.

“Yes, very much so. But I fail to see the importance of stating it.” He sat at his desk, calm as could be. The picture of nonchalance. That fucking bastard.

I didn't get the chance to shoot him. Or rather, I had the chance and couldn't. Part of it was not knowing how to use a gun, the other part...The other part was I was afraid. Because even though I wanted him dead, I couldn't do it myself. The remaining guard backhanded me, gun still put on safety flying into a corner. The man grabbed me by my hair,

sandy blond like Mom's, as Charles leaned forward, hands on his desk.

“Let this be a lesson, Christine. Never cross me again.”

I cried that night. I hadn't cried the first time, when that man died on our floor, but I cried now. And this time, there was no Mom to whisper to me as she tucked me up in pink covers or sing of castles in clouds far away. There was no Mom to be strong for, to put on a smile and be happy because I couldn't break her heart. There was no Mom trying with all her might to save me even though I never knew it until it was too late. There was only me in this silent house because I sure as hell had no father.

The funeral was three days later. Mom's death was ruled an accident, a tumble down the stairs from too much alcohol. No one knew her well enough to know what a load of shit that was. I had expected something to that effect; Charles was good at cover-ups. It was a sunny day when we buried her and I was pissed at how unfair that was. Apparently that's one of the things Hollywood gets wrong; sad and rainy, my ass. I wore a black dress for her, because she never got me in one when she was alive. I didn't cry. I wanted to, more than anything, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Not ever again. I stayed behind even when the service was over, even when my father and brother walked briskly back to the limo, chatting over business. I sat on the grass, crossing my legs beneath the skirt.

“I'm going to get free, you know. I promise, Mom. I'll finish what you started.”

“I might be able to help with that.” Standing behind me, a manilla envelope in one hand, was Samuel Hawkins, Mom's personal driver.

“Oh yeah? And just why would you do that?” He held the envelope out to me.

“Because your mother asked me to.” I took the envelope, keeping far out of arms reach as I opened it.

Inside were papers—a birth certificate, school records, a future driver's license—all under a different name. It was on that day in September, even if I was the only one who knew, that Christine Rosemarie Lansbury died and Katlynn Christine Crawford was born.

Somehow that birth certificate changed me. Not in any way that Charles would have noticed the few times he was ever home. It was all internal and the only internal that he cared about was the one he popped a few rounds in or maybe opened up with a Bowie knife

if he was being creative. That birth certificate, the future it offered me in the form of a name, made me think about a lot of things.

"Hey, Sam?" I tapped my pencil against the half-filled page of division problems. Sam, now my driver, looked up from his magazine.

"Yeah?"

"Did you know about...about my mom trying to run?"

"No...not exactly."

"Not exactly."

"I knew something was wrong. Your mom had me drive her around one day after she talked to your...to Mr. Lansbury. She was in tears the whole time."

"That can't have been a first," I snorted, tossing aside my homework. Who needed division anyway?

"No but...well, she gave me that envelope a week later. Said if anything happened to her...to make sure it got to you. And to help you any way I could."

"Poor you, talk about a crap job."

"Nah, not so bad. Least things are always entertaining." I folded my arms over my crumpled papers, resting my chin on them.

"Hey Sam."

"You're not going to finish your homework, are you?"

"More important things right now."

"Such as?"

"Do you think Mom would still be alive...if she weren't such a good person?" Sam looked up from his newspaper.

"Miss Chris..."

"That's how it goes though, huh? Bad things happen to good people. They say that, right?"

"Yeah...yeah they do."

"Well they suck."

"I know."

Bad people killed innocent people. Most figured that out by the time they were toilet-trained, I being a glaring exception. That was bad. It was wrong. No freaking duh. But what about innocent people killing bad people? Ok, I guess if you're killing someone, that doesn't make you innocent necessarily but the point was...was killing someone like Charles really all that bad? Would it be seen as murder of justice? Because the way I saw it, the criminal justice system wasn't gonna get its ass off that comfy judge's bench anytime soon so who else was left to right the wrongs he'd done? I sat by my open window, stomach no longer doing cartwheels. Justice. Yeah. I could do that.

Death. I thought about that nearly as much as I thought about good people. Not killing specifically, but just death in general. Killing wasn't the only way to die. Old age, illness, being plowed over by a mac truck and ending up as a bloody smear on a crosswalk. Death happened, it happened a lot and in various forms and usually it sucked, like when it happened too soon or to someone who was basically a good person, some so good they never even looked cross-eyed at anybody. But sometimes death was a good thing, because really, death isn't the end, now, is it? No matter where I looked, death was never the end. Except in Judaism, but I figured you have to have one oddball, right? But death...death was almost never it. Something always came after. Death meant no pain. Death meant change. It meant the start of something new.

Names. They meant something new too. A baby's name on a birth certificate, a woman discarding her maiden name. Katlynn gave me that new beginning Mom had so desperately hoped for. Sometimes, I would sit in my room and write my name over and over again on the carpet with the tip of my finger. Katlynn, Katlynn, Katlynn, until I had trouble answering to Christine at all.

"Chris? Chris? Are you listening to me?" I looked up to find Holly, all long legs and bouncy brown curls, standing at my desk.

"What?"

"Class is over. Didn't you hear the bell?"

"Nah, guess I wasn't paying attention." I slung my Iron Man bag across my torso, following her out of the empty math room.

"No kidding, I've been calling your name for, like, five minutes now."

"Sorry." I smiled apologetically, following her out into the hallway.

"You know, you've been really dazy lately. Everything ok?" Holly asked, lifting her math book to rest on her hip.

"Yeah, just tired, is all."

"That's all."

"Yeah. I got insomnia, I think."

"Oh...that sucks."

"Yeah."

"Well, see you later?"

"Yeah...see ya."

"Well, I guess worse things could happen. Not so bad if people just think you're a space case." I glared at Sam, feet propped on the dash board.

"I am not a space case."

"But they think that."

"Dunno why."

"You really have that hard a time?"

"Oh shut up." I leaned my elbow on the car door, ponytail tossed by the air from the open window.

"Hey Sam."

"Yeah?"

"...You loved my mom, didn't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you were there for my mom and now you're helping me just because she asked you to, even if it's dangerous."

"Yeah."

"Not something a person does just because."

"So your solution is I loved your mom."

"It's a logical conclusion."

"To an eleven year old, I suppose it is."

"But..."

"But that isn't why I'm helping you."

"So spill."

"Nosy little thing aren't you?" Sam stayed silent for a moment, staring straight ahead with his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. He didn't talk until we came to a stop light.

"I had a sister once--Sara."

"Uh oh."

"Caught that, huh? She was only a few years younger than me, but it always seemed like a lot longer than that. She was so small and sweet and...just good. That's the only word for it. Good." I grit my teeth. A good girl. That had disaster tattooed across its forehead.

"It was fall of her freshman year of college. Well that was the start of it. She met this guy, a football player at the school, you know the type. The small town girl and the football star, the recipe of every Lifetime movie. What could go wrong?" He snorted derisively, taking a left sharper than normal.

"It was three months before I noticed, three fucking months. She came to me crying, covered in bruises. I begged her to leave him then and she tried at first but..."

"How long before he killed her?" Because that had to be how it ended. There would be no happy ending for Sara.

"It was about six months later, give or take. I had just moved here, no more than a month before. I was getting out of my job at Wendy's when I got the call. Three nine-mils, one in the torso, two in the head. She was dead before the last bullet was even fired."

"And her boyfriend?"

"Twenty-five to life with the possibility of parole."

"So you're helping me because...what? You feel guilty?" Sam pulled into the garage, sitting there in the darkness.

"I guess you could call it that. I guess I looked at your mom and saw Sara, saw someone being beaten down and too afraid to run and then when she did try to run..." She

died.

“I failed Sara and I failed your mom. I won't fail you.” I hesitated for a moment, before leaning over to bump his arm with my shoulder.

“I know.”

“Get up, Christine.” I glared up at Sensei Collins from where I was sprawled across the blue mat.

“I would if I could feel my legs.”

“Christine, get up.”

“I'm trying.”

“Not hard enough. You think a real attacker will just stand here waiting? You'll be dead the minute you go down.” Dead, just like Mom. Dead and wasting the future she'd secured for me. I struggled to my feet, wavering a bit before raising my fists before me.

“Ok, just like you've been practicing. Come at me with all you've got.”

It was over Spring break when I was eleven that I held my first gun. Well, it wasn't necessarily my gun, it was Stephen's, one of three. He usually carried one at his hip and one at his shoulder and the other he kept stashed somewhere in his room. He and Charles were somewhere in Utah, a business trip that thankfully left me alone, since Sam was doubled over in his apartment puking for all he was worth, courtesy of a nasty stomach bug. I felt it was a prime opportunity for spying and theft; no way I could've pulled this off with Sam hovering. Stephen's bedroom door was locked, not that that surprised me. He had been locking it since I was in first grade, when I decided that no morning was complete without waking him up to a faceful of water. The lock was easy enough to pick. I had learned to pick tougher locks than this from Sam; he felt it was a simple and safe enough skill for me to learn until I was older. Grown ups, so fussy.

Stephen's room looked much the same as it had when I was six—bare tan walls, wood floor covered with a simple brown rug, shelves stacked with books on everything from biology to forensics, with his special collection stashed in his box springs. That I had found not too long before he'd bought his locks and boy, had Mom been mad. I figured he

probably kept his third gun hidden, in a closet or desk drawer, so I checked there first. I found nothing. I checked the box spring and again found only his Playboys. I searched and searched until finally, tucked away in an old Monopoly box, I found it. I picked it up in my hands, matte black and in perfect condition. I turned it over and over, feeling its weight. It was something like this that had killed my mother. I put a finger to the trigger, hovering a scant inch over it, before I returned it to the box. I wouldn't take it, not yet. But someday soon, I would.

That day was coming sooner than I had planned. I hated Charles, a lot. I had yet to find a word in English or French that quite covered it. His sudden announcement of a Christmas party for his “business partners”—i.e., his bowing, scraping little toadies—and my mandatory presence didn't much help.

“No.”

“You're going whether you like it or not. Maria will help you get ready.”

“I'm sorry, pretty sure I said no.”

“And I said, 'whether you like it or not.' At six o'clock, you'll be ready and you'll be smiling.” I heard the distinct “or else” dangling at the end.

“Damn it, how much freaking hair spray do you think I'll need?” I snarled, eyes watering as she spritzed me again.

“Everything must be perfect, señorita. It is a very important night for your father,”

Maria said, checking my curls one last time before deeming them adequate.

“Well, wonderful for my father.” I made the word “father” sound significantly like a dirty word.

“Oh for one night, Ms. Christine, can you not behave yourself?” Oh, now that, I thought, was rich, as if *I* was the one shooting people and pimping out teenagers. Maria zipped me into the blue silk dress, all flouncy, tiered skirt and ruched bodice, tweaking sandy-blond curls and helping me strap on the silver kitten heels. If ever I believed in a hell, it was standing there in that dress. Or, rather, it was standing at Charles's side with a smile slapped on my face as he carefully greeted each of his “guests.” He had booked the Rodeo Ballroom at the Beverly Hills Hotel and the whole room was decked out in silver and blue,

trying to mimic the white winter that California never saw. It took a half hour to greet everyone. At six thirty on the dot, everyone was seated for dinner. I couldn't name half of what was on the menu so I was beyond grateful for the chocolate-drizzled raspberry cheesecake that ended the meal. I was too young to get shit-faced; chocolate would just have to do. After that I drifted, keeping to the edges of the ballroom and only smiling when absolutely necessary.

"Ah, Christine, here you are." Of course, didn't it just figure? I turned slowly, giving myself time to fake a smile as well as to keep from stumbling.

"Hello, Father," I said, sweet as an arsenic-tainted gumbdrop.

"Marcus, Liam, this is my daughter Christine. Christine, this is Marcus Van Cassel and his son Liam." I knew who Marcus was, although we had never been introduced. I had seen him before, five foot six with badly pock-marked skin, skulking around my father every Friday. His son was a little easier on the eyes, taller than his father and with green eyes that drew attention away from the few acne scars he had.

"Marcus is a very valued associate of mine. Liam is, I believe you said two years older than Christine?"

"Yes, sir. I'll be fourteen next week."

"Wonderful, a fine age. I'm sure Christine wouldn't mind keeping you company. These things can be so boring for the young." I stood there, feeling a molar crack as I clenched my jaw. This was unexpected. This I had not planned for. Had Mom suspected his plans, even when I was a child? Was that why she had tried to take me and run?

"I'm sure Liam would appreciate the company," Marcus said with a booming laugh and a clap to Liam's back. I turned to glare at Charles from the corner of my eye as he leaned forward, whispering in my ear.

"Someday you'll thank me for this."

"And someday you will be sorry I was ever born."

It was that day, I suppose, that I realized I would have to kill him. It had crossed my mind to do it, to make him pay for Mom, but somehow I shied away from it as quickly at it came. But now, I had to accept facts. Charles had to die. If I wanted any chance at freedom, it would

have to come at a price. He had proven that he would never let me go three years ago when he put a bullet in Mom's head. As long as he lived, he would never let me escape. Even if I left, he would chase me, follow me, and then he would do to me what he had done to her. I looked at my reflection in the window of my room.

"I'm not going to fail."

"You're sure?"

"Not much choice. None, really." I was assembling and disassembling Sam's gun, readying myself for the day I would have one of my own. It was an exercise I had been doing for three solid months. I could probably do it in my sleep and I was honestly just waiting for Sam to have me try it.

"None?"

"He'll never let me go. I knew that when he killed Mom, mostly, at least. But now he's seeing me as valuable. And that's dangerous."

"Because people don't like losing valuable things."

"Bingo."

"So you kill him and then what?"

"I run."

"That's it?"

"Still hammering out the particulars."

"Let me know when you're done hammering."

I was thirteen when my brother went away for college, majoring at Harvard in, of all things, law. The complete irony of it had me rolling on my bedroom floor in laughter and tears. I wasn't sad or anything. By then, he was so much like Charles that there was no way for me to love him, even when I remembered what Mom once told me.

"Family, ma chère, is the most important thing you have."

"I don't know...I think you're the only family I have."

"You have your brother too, even if sometimes he forgets."

"Do you have a brother, Mom?"

"Yes, *chérie*, two actually."

"Older or younger?"

"One of each."

"Oh...Did you love them?"

"I still do."

"What song is that?"

"What song is what?" I asked, taking apart the gun Sam had gotten me for Christmas, a nice, compact 45 Smith and Wesson just like his.

"That song you're humming. You hum it all the time." I looked up in surprise.

"I do?"

"You don't notice?"

"Uh uh."

"So what song is it?" I chewed my lip, a habit I had developed to keep from gritting my teeth.

"You know my mom was a singer, right?"

"I think she mentioned it once. It explains why she took you to the theater all the time."

"Well, her favorite role was as Cosette in *Les Miserables* and her favorite song from that role was Castle on a Cloud. She used to sing it to me all the time when I was a kid."

"So you probably have it memorized."

"I know I do. I guess I got so used to hearing it that when she was gone..."

"You started humming it."

"Yeah."

"I never was much of a music guy but wanna sing it for me?" I laughed.

"You sure? I didn't inherit my mom's talent."

"I've heard worse, believe me. My upstairs neighbor could drive a nun mad." I wasn't sure whether he was being honest or just teasing me, but I wet my throat with a sip of Sierra

Mist and started singing.

“There is a castle on a cloud. I like to go there in my sleep. Aren't any floors for me to sweep. Not in my castle on a cloud.”

The Sunday before my birthday, I went to church. It had been almost nine years since I had set foot in church. The last time had been Mom's funeral. I had forgotten how quiet churches could be and how somehow that quiet was comforting. I sat there in a pew looking up at the cross, feeling a little like a kid with their hand in the cookie jar or a teenager stuffing a Playboy under his mattress, knowing I was doing, or going to do, something I wasn't supposed to. I figured that murder was probably a step up from stealing a cookie. I looked up at the cross and the blood-spattered figure nailed to it, chewing on the nail of my thumb.

“Ok, look, I know you probably aren't the biggest advocate of murder. Ok, you probably really dislike murder. I mean, I know you're supposed to be all peace, love and...well, not rock and roll but...forgiveness, maybe?” I grimaced as the nail broke between my teeth with a jolting pain.

“Anyway, murder, you don't like it. And I get that, I do. But you have to admit, Charles deserves it. And it's not just revenge. I mean, it mostly is, but it's also justice for all the people he's killed, who never got it. And you can't say you don't approve of justice.” I didn't expect anything, no flash of light or choir of angels or whatever. I figured even if some part of God did understand, he wouldn't say so. I left the church with no kind of absolution and somehow I was ok with that.

On January 16th, a Friday, I packed my things in the black plaid suitcase Mom had bought me when I was eight. I took mostly clothes; there wasn't much in the way of objects that I wanted. I tucked my old, faded teddy bear underneath a pair of jeans and hung around my neck the pearl necklace that had been in the envelope, an heirloom of Mom's family. The last thing left was my Smith and Wesson, carefully holstered at my shoulder. I looked around my bedroom one last time, took in the once-pink, now-blue walls and the white-painted

furniture, the window that looked out over the pool, before turning around, suitcase in hand, and shutting the door. Down the hall was an open door and through it I could hear my father's eloquent voice giving orders to one of his numerous trained monkeys. I set down the suitcase, just at the edge of the stairs.

It was weird. I half-expected to find him pressing a gun to another person's head, just like the other two times I had come here, but all I found was him behind his desk with papers spread out and his guard at his shoulder. He didn't bother looking up as I opened the door.

"Christine, I am busy. Go outside and play or something." He probably forgot I was a bit old for playing outside.

"We need to talk."

"I'm busy." I pulled the gun from my holster, shooting his guard in his kneecaps, a painful but not fatal shot. A wheelchair was probably preferable to a coffin. That got his attention.

"We need to talk *now*." That seemed to amuse him. He leaned back in the leather chair, fingers twining together to rest on his lap.

"I see you're more like me than I thought. A promising discovery."

"Actually I'm not like you at all. See, the difference between you and me? I don't kill for fun." I leveled the barrel between his eyes.

"Oh? So what was that just now?"

"That was me defending myself. Couldn't let him shoot me before I got to finish with you."

"You're going to kill me." He didn't seem surprised at all.

"Yeah. I am. The way you killed Mom." He snorted.

"Weak woman, not worth the time and trouble. But at least she managed to produce useful offspring before she died."

"Before you killed her."

"Yes, before that."

"You could've just let us go, you know. You wouldn't have to die if you had."

“I would never let her take what belonged to me.” And that was the crux of it. I wasn't his daughter, not really. I was a thing, an object, like the fancy polished limo outside. And just like he wouldn't let Mom take me, neither was he going to let me leave.

I had known the second guard was there, carefully hidden behind a bookcase like some kind of lame Bond villain. I'd found the hiding spot when I was twelve, sneaking into his office over Christmas break. I twisted out of the way of the pistol aiming for my head, the barrel of my own gun cracking him across the face. I broke skin, but didn't manage to break bone the way I had hoped. He faltered a step, enough that I was able to dodge hands aimed for my throat. The teachers I'd had all stressed strength versus speed. Strength is great but speed is better. Keep moving, tire them out, that strength isn't worth a damn if they can't touch you. But if they do touch you, if they grab you, start praying. Pray hard. He caught himself, turning with a closed fist. I managed to avoid a hit to the face, but he managed to clip my shoulder hard enough to bruise.

I stumbled backwards, shoes catching on the new Oriental rug. I caught myself on a bookcase with my free hand, raising my gun blindly and pulling the trigger. I didn't much care what I hit, even hitting the wall would give me a second to recover. The bullet buried itself in the wall, just missing the goon's head. The next shot, aimed for his thigh and too quick for him to dodge again, hit true. The bullet hit bone, I knew it had to have, the way the goon went down screaming and clutching his thigh. If he was lucky, he'd walk with a cane the rest of his life. A shot through both hands, and he was finally down. I looked up at Charles, who was no longer lounging behind his desk so smugly, but standing with a straight back and a gun in his own hand. The same gun, I could tell without a second glance, that had killed Mom.

“Christine, I would rethink this if I were you.”

“You didn't rethink killing Mom.” Charles sneered, an echo of the one I saw when I was six.

“Is that the reason for this ridiculous rebellion?” I leveled my gun, aiming right between his eyes even as his gun stayed near his hip.

“It's reason enough,” I snarled.

"The life of a worthless bitch who didn't know her place?" It wasn't said with anger; his face was flat of any hint of it.

"She was my mother, your wife."

"She was pretty and useful, that's all. Honestly, sentiment. I never should have let that woman raise you. She ruined you." Behind the calm exterior I could hear the simmering disgust. Disgust that I had a conscience, a heart, a soul, that I was everything he wasn't.

"Yeah, I guess she did." I pulled the trigger without another thought, bullet lodging in his right shoulder. Charles dropped to the floor, the pain loosening the grip on his own gun. I moved over the blood-stained floor, standing at his head with my gun poised at his heart.

"You don't have it in you. That woman made you weak."

"And you would have made me strong?"

"I would have allowed nothing less." He smirked coldly, as if it was something to be proud of.

"You don't think I'll do it."

"You can't do it. No matter how hard you try, you'll never--" *Bang.* I stood there for a moment, half expecting him to sit back up. It seemed too...easy I guess, although it hadn't been a total cakewalk. But it seemed so sudden, so final, nine years of training and planning leading up to this moment and it was over with one shot. Blood began to stain his shirt as I finally crouched down. He looked as he always had, cold and solemn, and only the pressing of my fingers against his unmoving jugular proved what I knew from the pooling blood. The king is dead, long live me.

"You finally did it." Sam stood in the doorway, suit a mess and his own gun smoking in his hand.

"What the hell, Sam?" I jolted forwards, nearly tripping over Charles' corpse.

"The guards downstairs. They heard the shots so...gave me some trouble, but they are all either dead or in no state to be saying anything to anyone."

"But...why?"

"You need a clean get-away. Dead men tell no tales, Katlynn." It was the first time anyone had used my new name, now my only name.

“But won't they suspect something? If you're alive then...”

“That's why you have to kill me.” I froze, one hand clutching his arm.

“If I'm dead, they'll suspect you killed everyone. It might make coming after you seem...an unwise thing to do.”

“But...why...I can just kneecap you or something!”

“Kat, the minute you run, the minute word gets out, your brother will come here. He'll take over. And who do you think he'll blame for this?” Sam. He would blame Sam, who should have been watching me better, reporting my actions better, done everything better. And as payback for my actions and his failure, he'd make Sam suffer. Suffer in ways I could imagine and didn't want to.

“Your mom would be proud, you know. She is proud.” I hadn't cried since Mom died, not a single tear. Those words has them choking my throat.

“You too. She'd be proud, that you helped me. So would Sara.”

“I hope so. Now, come on, Kat. Do what you have to do.” He dropped his gun, a gun which, I realized numbly, was the same make and model as mine.

“Kat.” I looked up.

“You're a good girl. Take care of yourself.” He smiled at me, in that room of bodies, covered in blood. I raised my gun, finger oddly still.

“Hey, Sam.”

“Yeah?”

“Say hi to them when you get there.” *Bang.*